

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (previously amended) In a unit including (i) a material hopper having a neck, and (ii) equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, an improvement to the unit comprising a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material, the removable assembly incorporating a sealing device to seal off the neck of the hopper during hopper removal from the equipment, the sealing device also to regulate material flow from the hopper when the hopper is positioned to dispense material, the sealing device comprising a sliding mechanism designed to slide into and out of sealing arrangement with the neck of the hopper.

2. (original) The improved unit of Claim 1, the sealing device being in a horizontal orientation to seal the neck of the hopper.

3. (original) The improved unit of Claim 1, the sealing device being in an inclined orientation off the horizontal to seal the neck of the hopper.

4. (original) The improved unit of Claim 2, the sealing device being a slide gate.

5. (previously amended) In a unit including (i) a material hopper having a neck, and (ii) equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, an improvement to the unit comprising a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material, the removable assembly incorporating a sealing device to seal off the neck of the hopper during hopper removal from the equipment, the sealing device also to regulate material flow from the hopper, the sealing device comprising a slide gate operably aligned by metering gate support guides, slidably movable by the retraction and extension of a metering cylinder.

6. (cancelled)

7. (previously amended) In a unit including (i) a material hopper having a neck, and (ii) equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, an improvement to the unit comprising a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material, the removable assembly incorporating a sealing device to seal off the neck of the hopper during hopper removal from the equipment, the sealing device also to regulate material flow from the hopper, the removable assembly further comprising a releasable securing assembly, which along with the sealing device

enables the hopper to be removed from the equipment, the releasable securing assembly comprising a tongue and a locking groove assembly between the hopper and the equipment.

8. (previously amended) In a unit including (i) a material hopper having a neck, and (ii) equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, an improvement to the unit comprising a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material, the removable assembly incorporating a sealing device to seal off the neck of the hopper during hopper removal from the equipment, the sealing device also to regulate material flow from the hopper, the removable assembly further comprising a releasable securing assembly, which along with the sealing device enables the hopper to be removed from the equipment, the releasable securing assembly comprising a release pin and retaining bracket assembly between the hopper and the equipment, the release pin extending through the removable assembly and the retaining bracket.

9. (previously amended) The improved unit of Claim 7, wherein the releasable securing assembly enables the hopper to be lifted off of the equipment vertically, without initially laterally sliding the hopper on the equipment to disengage the releasable securing assembly.

10. (currently amended) A gravimetric blender comprising:

(a) a material hopper having a neck, and

(b) a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the blender, the removable assembly including a slide gate:

wherein the slide gate both regulates material flow from the hopper to the blender when the hopper is positioned to disperse material, and seals off the neck of the hopper during removal from the blender.

11. (currently amended) A gravimetric blender comprising:

(a) a material hopper having a neck, and

(b) a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the blender, the removable assembly including a slide gate:

wherein the slide gate both regulates material flow from the hopper to the blender, and seals off the neck of the hopper during removal from the blender, the slide gate being slidably movable by the retraction and extension of a metering cylinder.

12. (previously amended) The gravimetric blender of Claim 10, the removable assembly further comprising a releasable securing assembly, which along with the slide gate, enables the hopper to be removed from the blender.

13. (previously amended) The gravimetric blender of Claim 12, the releasable securing assembly comprising a tongue, and a locking groove assembly between the hopper and the blender.

14. (previously amended) The gravimetric blender of Claim 12, the releasable securing assembly comprising a release pin and retaining bracket assembly between the hopper and the blender, the release pin extending through the removable assembly and the retaining bracket.

15. (original) The gravimetric blender of Claim 12, wherein the releasable securing assembly enables the hopper to be lifted off of the blender vertically, without initially laterally sliding the hopper relative to the blender to disengage the releasable securing assembly.

16. (previously amended) A method of dispensing material from a material hopper having a neck to equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, the method comprising the following steps:

(a) providing a metering device in the form of a sliding mechanism designed to slide into and out of sealing arrangement with the neck of the hopper;

(b) regulating the material flow rate from the hopper to the equipment with the metering device until the hopper needs to be refilled with material;

(c) sealing off the neck of the hopper with the metering device;

(d) disengaging the hopper from the equipment without laterally sliding the hopper relative to the equipment;

(e) filling the hopper with material; and

(f) reengaging the hopper to the equipment.

17. (original) The method according to Claim 16, wherein steps (a) and (b) are accomplished with a slide gate.

18. (previously amended) The method according to Claim 16, wherein step (c) of disengaging the hopper from the equipment is accomplished by removing a release pin from the hopper and a retaining bracket on the equipment.

19. (previously added) The improved unit of Claim 3, the sealing device being a slide gate.

20. (previously added) The improved unit of Claim 8, wherein the releasable securing assembly enables the hopper to be lifted off of the equipment vertically, without initially laterally sliding the hopper on the equipment to disengage the releasable securing assembly.

21. (previously added) A gravimetric blender comprising:

(a) a material hopper having a neck, and

(b) a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the blender, the removable assembly including a slide gate:

wherein the slide gate both regulates material flow from the hopper to the blender, and seals off the neck of the hopper during removal from the blender;

the removable assembly further comprising a releasable securing assembly, which along with the slide gate, enables the hopper to be removed from the blender, the releasable securing assembly comprising a tongue and locking groove assembly between the hopper and the blender.

22. (previously added) A gravimetric blender comprising:

(a) a material hopper having a neck, and

(b) a removable assembly enabling removability of the hopper from the blender, the removable assembly including a slide gate:

wherein the slide gate both regulates material flow from the hopper to the blender, and seals off the neck of the hopper during removal from the blender;

the removable assembly further comprising a releasable securing assembly, which along with the slide gate, enables the hopper to be removed from the blender, the releasable securing assembly comprising a release pin and retaining bracket assembly between the hopper and the blender, the release pin extending through the removable assembly and the retaining bracket.

23. (previously added) A method of dispensing material from a material hopper having a neck to equipment to which the material hopper dispenses material through the neck, the method comprising the following steps:

(a) regulating the material flow rate from the hopper to the equipment with a metering device until the hopper needs to be refilled with material;

(b) sealing off the neck of the hopper with the metering device;

(c) disengaging the hopper from the equipment without laterally sliding the hopper relative to the equipment; and

(d) reengaging the hopper to the equipment;

wherein step (c) of disengaging the hopper from the equipment is accomplished by removing a release pin from the hopper and a retaining bracket on the equipment.

24. (currently amended) A hopper for receiving material and dispensing the material to an associated machine, comprising:

a hopper container having an opening for receiving said material in an upper portion of the hopper container and a discharge opening in a lower portion of the hopper container for dispensing said material;

a sealing device to seal off the discharge opening for removing said hopper from said machine, the sealing device also to regulate material flow from said hopper; when the hopper is positioned to dispense material

the sealing device comprising a sliding mechanism designed to slide into and out of sealing arrangement with the discharge opening of the hopper container.

25. (previously added) The hopper of Claim 24, wherein the sealing device is a slide gate.

26. (previously added) The hopper of Claim 25, the slide gate being operably aligned by metering gate support guides, slidably movable by the retraction and extension of a metering cylinder.